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I Said “No” and God Laughed

Mary Turner

I was preaching in a Christian Church. *Oh my! What a surprise—even for me!* To understand how I got there you have to look at my life story: Growing up in a Christian home, I believed all authority was from men and women should be recessive in their thoughts and actions. I read the story of Ruth hundreds of time and said, “When I get married, I want to be like Ruth.” God was just sitting there waiting for me, probably with a bucket of cold reality.

When she found out she was expecting her sixth child, my mother thought, “Oh, no!” The next youngest would start school the following fall. When she told my dad, he “wisely” said since they had not planned this pregnancy, perhaps God was going to give them the second son they had always wanted. So they started a daily regimen of prayer for their son, David Wesley...for surely it would be a son. They made a promise to God: they would raise him to be a pastor or an author who would be a blessing and honor to God. When I was born, they were in disbelief—so much so that it took them three days to think of a name (and even this was an afterthought proposed by a friend).

Still my parents remembered their promise to God and spent extra time with me, reading the Bible to me and praying for and with me. One afternoon when I was four years old I woke from a dream so real I ran to the kitchen and asked my mother, “What is a nurse?”

I had never seen one and my mother chuckled, “Why would you want to know about nurses?”

“Because God told me to be a nurse!” My mother sat down immediately and told me about nurses. From that day forward my total focus was on becoming a nurse—the best nurse in the world!

The same year, I was upset because all my siblings had gone to Vacation Bible School, but I was not allowed to go. I asked the head of VBS why I could not come, and she said I had to be able to read first. So the winter of my fourth year I started reading the only book in the house, the Bible. Daily I spent time in the word, and by the next June I was reading and allowed to go to VBS just before my fifth birthday.

Reading the Bible daily became a habit, and so it was that I began a long journey of learning and asking “impossible” questions: “If the Bible says God walks on the wind, why can’t I see him?” “The clouds are his chariot, so if I lay in the lawn will I see him ride by?”

My mother used to say, “Mary Elizabeth, if you ask one more question you will have to sit in the corner!” I think I knew every crack in the plaster and ding in the woodwork from sitting in that corner.

At eighteen I entered one of the best nursing schools in Wisconsin. This did not surprise me because God wanted me to be a nurse and things would just work out for me. For thirty years I worked as a nurse in the ER, Trauma Life or ICU. I became a wife (not as easy to be a Ruth as I expected) and mother of four. We lost our first child during pregnancy, then twelve years later I lost a very close friend, then in 1990 my father died, and then my mother in 1993. In November of 1995, my husband became ill and ten days later, just like that, he was gone. Suddenly I was a widow and on my own at fifty years of age. Psalm 88.18 asks, “God, why have you taken my closest friends?” But God was not gone. He was right there and prayer became my solace.

It seems that nothing in life is ever easy or explainable. My husband, Duwayne, had been in the Air Force for thirty years but I did not get his retirement savings, for the Air Force was missing one piece of paper. Then

Duwayne's half brothers and sister wanted the estate for his mother, so they threatened to take me to court and get it. I just gave them the life insurance money rather than fight them; after all, God explains what happens to ill-gotten gains. God would take care of me. I forgave them and moved on.

When my husband died, we had three children in college and one still in high school. While the two oldest were also in the military, they still needed occasional financial help. I had an excellent job with a large insurance company and though it was 150 miles round-trip to the office I gladly did it because it gave me three hours a day to talk to God and, most of all, listen for his wisdom.

On the last Sunday in April of 1998, God spoke to me again. The voice was as clear as a bell. I will not argue whether it was an angel, the Holy Spirit, or Jesus. I had heard God at age four, and now, fifty years later at fifty-four, it was again God. During the final prayer right after the sermon on John 10.22–30, I remember the question the pastor of Park Street Christian Church asked: "Do you know the voice of the Shepherd?"

I definitely knew the voice of the Shepherd and felt a tug on my heart. "What do you want from me?"

God said clearly, "I want you to go back to school, at Nebraska Christian College."

Of course I said yes, but my question for God was, "Who is going to take care of me?" I still had two sons in college and I would be without a job.

God said, "I will." So that afternoon I called my boss at the insurance company and told her that Friday would be my last day. Then on Monday I called and told NCC I was going to enroll there for the coming semester. I spent the summer getting ready. While it was not always easy, I did not worry about the money; God said he would take care of it.

Being a Christian is not always easy either. Well, duh—of course not! We are not called to an easy life when following Christ. Some comments by fellow Christians hurt the worst: "Don't ask this church for money. You already have an education that will support you." "You have as much right going to a Bible college as a pig does going to war." To the latter I just smiled and thought, "Well, at least God did not ask me to walk around naked for three years (see Isaiah 20.2–3)!"

I was even accused of causing problems in the church. My answer: "If I am causing the storm, then throw me overboard; God has a big fish just waiting to take me in." You see, I was only going away to school, not trying to take any one else with me and definitely not going to be a preacher, the furthest thing from my mind! I knew the Christian Church's stance on women in ministry, and I supported it.

Thus it was that from 1998–2002 I studied with some of the finest men and women of God I had ever met. By loading up my class schedule I was able to finish double degrees in four years and in May of 2002 I graduated summa cum laude with a BTh in church music and a BA in Christian education.

Earlier in April, however, the angst had set in. I was turned down at a Christian Church as a Christian education director, because I was "too old to work with children." I submitted Christian education material to a well-known publishing house; they said they would hire me the next day, but I would have to work from home and only get paid for what they published. Then the dean of students suggested I continue my education and become a hospital chaplain. But God had not said to continue my education past NCC, so back to the prayer pads I went.

The last week in April, Lincoln Christian University offered me a full scholarship in its master of divinity program. Wow! Of course I accepted: it could only be by God's hand. It only crossed my mind once that I would be a lonely little petunia in the onion patch: one woman and thirty-some males of all ages, most of them younger than I, and all in the divinity program.

Now I was looking at three more years of school without a full-time job. I had worked as a student employee at NCC in the maintenance department, cleaned houses, and played piano or organ at three different churches in Norfolk. I finished college with absolutely no debt. But I was now moving to a new town with multiple talented and experienced seminary students. Thankfully, LCU offered me a student job in the library (20 hours a week at minimum wage), and there was also the scholarship which covered everything but books.

When I went to get my books I was amazed at the cost and knew that I would need more income to support me through the next three years. There was an opening for a chaplain at the women's prison just outside of Lincoln, so I went there and applied. The head of the chaplaincy interviewed me and said I could

have the job and come to work right then that day—the hitch, they had no money to pay me! So on the first Sunday of September I spent time with my budget and then time on my knees talking it over with God. Surely if he had brought me this far, he would not abandon me. Thus, I went to sleep assured in his presence.

The next morning I was making coffee and noticed a name and phone number on my bulletin board. A lady at the library had told me there was a church about sixty miles south that was looking for a pianist and they were willing to pay wages and mileage. It was only 7:15, but since I had a class at 8:00 I decided to try the number. It turned out to be the pastor's cell phone number and he was on his way to work as a paramedic. He actually screamed when I told him why I had called. He stopped his truck in the middle of the road and ran around it, thanking God. A group had stayed after church the day before and prayed into the evening that God would send them a pianist. "Of course [I] should come and play. [I] did not need to try out.... [I] was an answer to prayer." In truth, they were an answer to my prayers as well.

On the second Sunday of September I started playing piano at Waggoner Christian Church in Waggoner, Illinois. The pastor could only be there three Sundays a month because of his job as a paramedic, so the head elder would preach the other Sunday. By Christmas I was also going to the church on Thursday evenings to lead a women's Bible study which I had written called "Wondercurrents, the Women of the Bible." It was based on this fact: The strongest part of every stream is the current which we cannot see. It is hidden but extremely strong, and this is the place of the woman in the Christian Church. We are to read, study, encourage, build up and support the men who run the church. (Can you hear God laughing yet?)

The head elder moved away, leaving no one to preach the third Sunday of each month. Of course, in seminary we had classes on preaching, and I needed a place to preach at least three sermons that could be evaluated by a congregation. So it was that I started preaching once a month. It was only to be for three months until I had met the requirements of the seminary course, but after those three months I was still preaching once, sometimes twice, a month.

In the spring of 2004, the pastor and his wife got a divorce and the congregation was most unhappy. Attendance fell off until there were only twelve to fourteen people on any given Sunday. By September they had decided to let the pastor go, and the elders of the church asked me if I would preach full-time for them. I responded, "No, but I will help you find a pastor through the school." That did not turn out well at all for various reasons: too far to drive, not enough money, no parsonage, church far too small, and on and on.

I was spending a great deal of time praying for the church and for a new pastor. My heart and mind were struggling because, you see, all my life from the time I can remember I had said, "I will not attend a church where there is a woman preacher." It became apparent that I would be preaching even if I did not want to. I needed the job at the church to get through my senior year, and the only recourse was to preach and play. Now God was really laughing.

It was going to take a great deal of kindness and encouragement to bring the church back to a healthy body. Of course God knew, and the Holy Spirit blessed my sermons with words I could never have dreamed. Then, on the last Sunday in September, the newly appointed head elder's wife died in her sleep on a Saturday night. She was my first funeral in the church, and from that time forward the church started to grow. Soon we had thirty new members and several baptisms. So for the next five years I preached full-time as God blessed the church with new members for his glory and honor. It was not only numbers that picked up, but also love of the word and a hunger to know what the word had to say.

I refused to be an elder in the church and God blessed that decision. The people of the church accepted me, perhaps out of necessity, but it took some time to win over the village and community. What was a woman doing preaching at a Christian Church? The community's ELCA Lutheran, Methodist, and American Baptist congregations accepted me and, for four years, I met bimonthly with their pastors for Bible study and encouragement. In addition, a large Christian Church twelve miles away gave me prayer support and kindly made their baptistery available.

With the growth of the church it became apparent we needed a youth pastor. We hired undergraduate students from LCU, and finally in 2007 we were able to hire a full-time youth pastor to work with the youth of the church and community. We had men's Bible study led by one of the elders and or the youth pastor, women's Bible study, and an outreach program called Tutoring Tuesday where we worked with at-risk students.

But God's story was not over yet. In the fall of 2009 I was to attend an intensive weeklong class to refresh my Hebrew skills, but on the Friday before the class was to begin God told me to cancel my plans and buy a house in Richland Center, Wisconsin. I cancelled my plans as directed and came back to my hometown on the following Monday. Tuesday I looked at a five-bedroom house but realized it was too much house for me. Wednesday morning I contacted a realtor who took me to see eight houses. I had friends revisit one of the houses with me that afternoon, put a bid on it, and by seven that evening I had a house under condition of inspection. The house inspector had a cancellation Thursday morning, and by noon the house was inspected. I submitted the changes that needed to be made and they were accepted. By 2:00 p.m. the house was mine and insured, and I was on the road back to Waggoner. A surprise for me was that this was the first house I had ever purchased and there was a program giving back money to new buyers. Strange? Never! God knew exactly what he was doing.

Was the church at Waggoner sad? Yes; they cried and wanted me to reconsider. I told them without a doubt God had a plan and would fill the void. Sure enough, when I called Lincoln Christian Seminary and asked for a pastor to fill the pulpit, they had a young family man in mind. He had been sorely misused by a Christian Church and was going to quit preaching altogether. He had moved his family in with his parents and acquired a full-time job, which he would need if preaching at Waggoner. The seminary told me he was a fantastic preacher. When I interviewed him for the board of elders, I realized what God had in mind: He would heal this young man and his family through this loving group of people in Waggoner. His talents of preaching would not be wasted, and his faith in fellow Christians would be restored.

As for me, I moved home hoping to retire, but that did not happen. I am now the Richland County coroner, and I preach at three different churches on a part-time basis—Baptist, Presbyterian, and Nazarene. It did not surprise me when the Christian Church did not welcome me back. Oh, I did try attending there, but several people got up and walked out when they saw who was back. Was Waggoner hard on me? No, definitely not, but Wisconsin Christian Churches seem not to want me as an ordained minister of the gospel. No problem, God wants me and will use me when and wherever he sees a need.

My New Year's resolution for 2012, the year when this article was written, came from Isaiah 7.9b, *Stand firm in the faith or you will not stand at all*. I am standing and I am ready. I wonder what God has in mind and if he is still laughing.

MARY TURNER REMAINS IN ACTIVE SERVICE TO THE CHURCH WHILE ENJOYING RETIREMENT IN APPLETON, WISCONSIN. AS DESCRIBED IN THE ARTICLE, SHE IS A FORMER NURSE AND CORONER, A GRADUATE OF NEBRASKA CHRISTIAN COLLEGE AND LINCOLN CHRISTIAN SEMINARY, AND FORMER MINISTER OF WAGGONER CHRISTIAN CHURCH, WAGGONER, ILLINOIS (SADIEGRIFFIN44@HOTMAIL.COM).

